

## **Breast Cancer Screening Among Women with Disabilities: Data from the California Behavioral Risk Factor Survey 2002**

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### **Background**

According to the United States Census 2000, about 14 percent of Californians have a disability, roughly 2.4 million of whom are women (1). Research has shown that women with disabilities often face physical and social barriers in accessing health care (2). This often leads to a delay in accessing primary and preventive care. In particular, there is rising concern about breast cancer screening for women with disabilities.

Breast cancer is the number one cancer among women today, accounting for nearly one in three cancers diagnosed among U.S. women. Studies have shown that early detection of breast cancer by mammography greatly improves chances for successful treatment and survival (3).

The American Cancer Society recommends that women ages 40 and above have a mammogram and clinical breast exam annually. Limited studies have indicated that women with disabilities are less likely than women without disabilities to be receiving mammograms within recommended guidelines. This is true especially for older women and women with more severe disabilities (4).

In this report, we explore data from the 2002 California Behavioral Risk Factor Survey (BRFS) and look at California women with disabilities and their use of mammography services compared to women without disabilities.

### **Methods and Data collection**

The Survey Research Group within the California Department of Health Services Cancer Detection Section, administers the BRFS annually to the California adult population. BRFS collects information on the health status and behaviors of California's non-institutionalized population. This analysis is based on 2,688 women ages 40 and older participating in the 2002 BRFS. The population was further broken down to look at the following age groups separately: 40-49 years old, 50-64 years old, and 65 years and older. All percentages presented here were adjusted to reflect the age and race distribution of the state of California.

### **Definition of variables**

BRFS asked women whether they have ever had a mammogram and how recently they have been screened. The survey also asks whether the most recent screening was part of a routine check-up or due to a breast problem or breast cancer.

BRFS identifies women with disabilities as women who report being limited in activity or using special equipment. Follow-up questions ask whether the women need the help of someone to perform routine or self-care activities of daily living. Based on these questions, the following three groups of women have been identified:

- **No Disability:** If they answered "no" to being limited in activity and using special equipment they were identified as not having a disability.

- **Disability and does not need assistance:** If they answered “yes” to being limited in activity or using special equipment and “no” to the follow-up questions they were identified as having a disability and not needing assistance from others (no-assist).
- **Disability and needs assistance:** If they answered “yes” to being limited in activity or using special equipment and “yes” to one of the follow-up questions they were identified as having a disability and needing assistance from others (yes-assist).

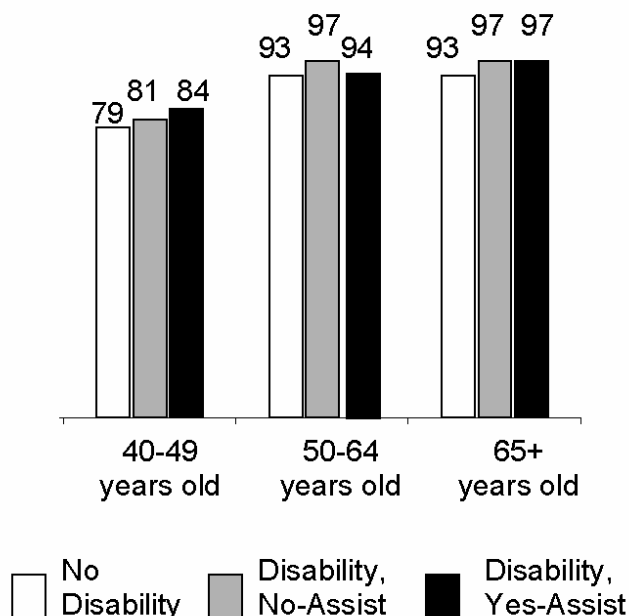
## Results

### How many California women have a disability?

Based on BRFS 2002, about 19.3 percent of California women report having a disability (i.e., limited in activity or use adaptive equipment). More specifically, 12.5 percent of California women have a disability and do not need assistance from others. And 6.7 percent of California women have a disability and do need assistance from others.

### How many California women have ever had a mammogram? (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Percentage of California women who ever had a mammogram, by age and disability status.

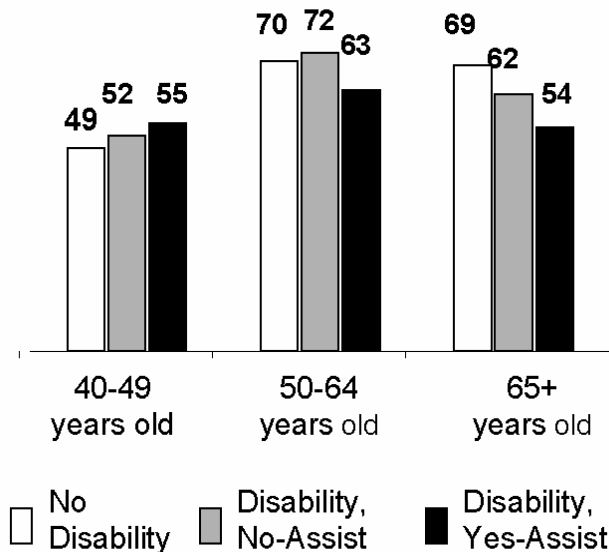


Source: California BRFS 2002

Among all age groups, women with disabilities are just as likely to have ever had a mammogram as women without disabilities. None of the differences in Figure 1 are statistically significant.

## How many California women had a recent mammogram? (See Figure 2)

Figure 2. Percentage of California women who had a mammogram within the past year, by age and disability status.

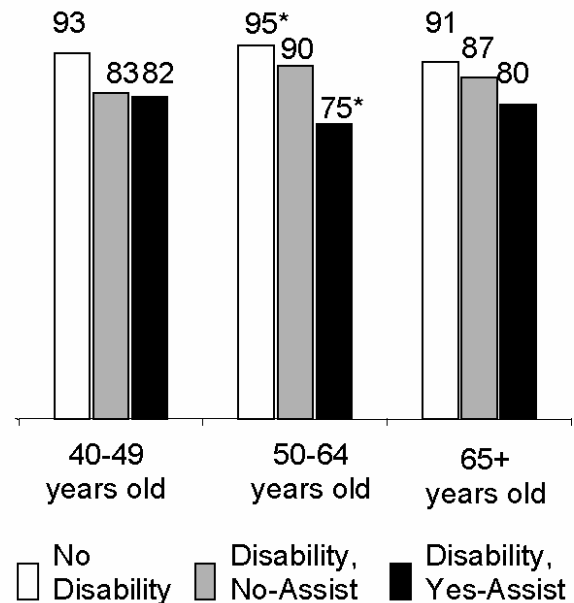


Source: California BRFS 2002

Whether a woman's disability status affects her chances of having had a mammogram in the last year depends upon age, although none of the differences shown here are statistically significant. Among women 40 to 49 years old, 49 percent of women without disabilities had a mammogram within the past year, compared to 52 percent of the no-assist group and 55 percent of the yes-assist group. However, among women 65 years and older, 69 percent of women without disabilities had a mammogram within the past year, compared to 62 percent of the no-assist group and 54 percent of the yes-assist group.

## How many California women had their recent mammogram as part of a routine exam? (See Figure 3)

Figure 3. Percentage of California women who had a mammogram as part of a routine exam, by age and disability status.



Source: California BRFS 2002

\*95% confidence intervals do not overlap, which suggests statistical significance

Among all age groups, women with disabilities were less likely to have had their most recent mammogram as part of a routine check-up, when compared to women without disabilities. Conversely, women with disabilities are more likely to get a mammogram due to a breast problem when compared to women without disabilities (data not shown here). Although the difference is statistically significant only among women 50-64 years old, the pattern is consistent across all groups.

## Conclusions

California women with disabilities are just as likely to have ever had a mammogram as women without disabilities. However, among

women 65 and older, women with disabilities are less likely to have had a mammogram within the past year. Although not statistically significant, the difference is too consistent to ignore and deserves more investigation. The pattern of women with disabilities being less likely to get their mammogram as part of a routine check-up is especially troubling, given that early diagnosis is crucial to treating cancer.

Public health plays a key role in reducing the barriers faced by women with disabilities and increasing their access to breast cancer screening and other health services. Specific policies public health could address include: training and educating health care providers on sensitivity and awareness of disability issues (5).

## Limitations

Telephone surveys do not reach segments of the disability population. This may include people without telephones, living in institutions, with cognitive disabilities, with hearing disabilities, or with severe disabilities that prevents the completion of the survey. In addition, some people may not identify with the disability questions used in the BRFSS. The Office on Disability and Health (ODH) is working with other researchers, programs, and disability constituents to develop more effective questions and methods of collecting data among the disability population.

## References

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